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Insurgent Success and Failure: Selected Case Studies 3.5(c)

A Research Paper

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May 1983

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Insurgent Success and Failure: Selected Case Studies

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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by the Insurgency Branch of the Office of Global Issues. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Instability and Insurgency Center, OGI, on 3.5(c)

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Insurgent Success and Failure: Selected Case Studies (U)

Key Judgments

Information available as of 8 April 1983 was used in this report

Although insurgencies differ greatly among themselves and may succeed or fail for individual or fortuitous reasons, an examination of past insurrections reveals a fairly close association of certain factors with insurgent success or failure. For this study, we looked at 14 dissimilar insurgencies, both successful and unsuccessful, and isolated a number of these factors. (C)

The characteristics that we believe were responsible for the outcome of the eight successful rural insurgencies analyzed in this paper include:

- Failure by the government to detect or to counter the initial stages of insurgent organization.
- Failure by the government to understand or act on the grievances that fed the insurgency.
- Emergence of nationalism as a key insurgent theme often exploited by the Communist elements.
- Lack of an effective government-sponsored political coalition as an alternative to insurgent coalitions.
- Indiscriminate government repression of opposition groups, leaving the insurgents as the only group able to represent popular grievances effectively.
- Existence of a charismatic and effective insurgent leader who maintained insurgent cadre morale despite setbacks.
- Government use of military tactics emphasizing static defense and conventional large-unit operations rather than offensive and small-unit unconventional operations.
- Existence of sanctuaries in adjacent countries or remote domestic areas where insurgent cadre could organize. (C)

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In the three unsuccessful rural insurgencies studied, the victorious governments were generally able to avoid those pitfalls while the insurgents were unable to develop safe sanctuaries or exploit nationalism. Moreover, in all three cases no charismatic leader—of the caliber of Mao or Castro—ever emerged. (C)

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There is no clear-cut case of successful urban insurgency in the post–World War II era. In the three unsuccessful urban insurgencies studied—Uruguay, Venezuela, and Argentina—the insurgents attempted but were unable to maintain rural insurgency. In Argentina and Uruguay, the

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civilian governments were initially paralyzed and eventually replaced by military governments able to penetrate insurgent organizations and neutralize their leadership. The draconian measures used to destroy these insurgencies were generally not actively opposed by the urban populations, which either supported or were intimidated by the military governments in power.

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Argentina (1973-78)

Environment of the Insurgency

Guerrilla activity in Argentina during the 1973-78 period grew out of the chaotic political situation that had existed since the overthrow of Juan Peron in 1955. The various military and civilian governments that ruled Argentina between 1955 and 1973 were unable to co-opt, assimilate, or repress large sectors of society that had embraced various aspects of Peronism. As a result, Argentina's political scene was marked by widespread labor unrest and terrorist violence. Additionally, the Argentine economy was in a steady downward spiral resulting from mismanagement, labor unrest, and weak commodity prices on the world market. A number of armed groups were formed during this period with the objective of bringing down the various militarily backed governments. The majority of these groups were at least nominally Peronist, although some Marxist groups were also formed. While disaffection with the existing regimes promoted a certain unity of action among all opposition groups, they often disagreed about the type of political system that would replace the government once it was defeated. Increasing terrorism and economic chaos eventually persuaded the military to cede power to a civilian government dominated by the Peronists. In April 1973 Hector Campora, the Peronist candidate, was elected President. After the election Juan Peron returned to Argentina from exile in Spain and was elected overwhelmingly to the presidency in September 1973. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Early History

Peron's return to power did not end the insurgent violence. His adoption of relatively conservative policies exacerbated a split between the left and right wings of the Peronist movement. The Montoneros, a well-organized militant Peronist group with a nationalistic socialist ideology, became increasingly radicalized. According to their own statements, the Montoneros believed that Peron was betraying the movement by aligning himself with industrialists and foreign interests. While not openly breaking with Peron, the Montoneros continued to organize among the Peronist youth, labor, and other sections of the movement, accumulating resources and material for a future struggle. By the time Peron died in July 1974, the Montoneros had developed an extensive network of hardcore cadre and support personnel. Huge sums of money were obtained through kidnapings, bank robberies, and extortion (over US $100 million was invested abroad). Weapons were purchased on the black market, stolen from government forces, and manufactured in underground factories. A political arm was also formed to organize mass support. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Soon after the Peron regime took power, most of the radical Marxist groups responded to Peron's drift to the right by increasing opposition to the government. Smaller groups eventually coalesced around the militant Trotskyite organization, the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). Although the ERP adopted primarily an urban warfare approach to pressure the regime, it also established a base area in the mountainous region of Tucuman Province. Many people in this area were sugar mill workers, one of the poorest groups in Argentina. In addition to the sugar mill workers, the ERP recruited among students, professionals, and, to a lesser extent, labor. [redacted] 3.5(c)

During the early 1970s, the ERP attempted to establish a "Robin Hood" image by stealing food, money, and consumer goods from the rich and distributing many of these items to poor urban dwellers. The primary targets of ERP attacks were foreign and domestic business interests, government officials, and the military. The attacks were generally kidnapings for ransom, assassinations, or bombings. Large military-type operations, including attacks against military installations involving up to 100 men, were also perpetrated, but these were relatively infrequent. ERP attacks were aimed at discrediting the government's ability to maintain order and at obtaining support from the poor and from organized labor. Various classified and unclassified reports indicate that the ERP believed that eventually the continuing chaos

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would either cause the Peronist government to collapse, leaving the ERP as the only organized group capable of establishing order, or force the government to give the ERP a leading position in a new coalition of leftist Peronists and Marxists. 3.5(c)

Government Response

Peron moved against the ERP as soon as he took power, primarily through the creation of rightwing Peronist paramilitary units to intimidate and assassinate leftwing opponents. Although most of these units were run through special departments of various police agencies, they were organized and directed by Peron's Minister for Social Welfare, Jose Lopez Rega, and his subordinates. The Federal Police were also tasked with combating the insurgents through the more traditional methods of penetration, investigation, and arrest. 3.5(c)

Initially the Army was reluctant to get involved in the antisubversive campaign. After nearly 17 years of military rule, the Army command wanted to rebuild an image of the Army as defender of the people. Although the military did penetrate and collect intelligence on both the ERP and the Montoneros, it avoided sharing information with the police. at least one Army corps organized its own paramilitary unit to act against leftist targets. Nevertheless, the bulk of the counterinsurgency effort was directed by civilian agencies. 3.5(c) 3.3(b)(1)

The inability of the civilian agencies to combat the insurgent violence because of politicalization, bureaucratic inertia, and lack of cooperation eventually persuaded the military to press for a more active role in the effort. After Peron's death in July of 1974, the military played an increasingly larger counterinsurgent role. In 1975 the military took over the counterinsurgent campaign against the ERP in Tucuman Province. Despite grumblings by some rightwing officers, the Army adopted an extremely enlightened counterinsurgency approach, particularly in the rural areas of the province, emphasizing civic action to improve the living conditions of the sugar mill workers and psychological operations to explain to the people what the military was trying to do. Military operations started with a massive sweep of the area, followed by the establishment of semipermanent base camps from which small-unit patrols were continually launched. The insurgents were thus kept on the run, while the population was won over by civil affairs programs. 3.5(c)

Efforts by the police to dismantle the ERP and Montonero urban network continued to fail. The Argentine legal system, because of its complexity and inefficiency, made it almost impossible to indict and sentence arrested insurgents and thereby discouraged arrests. Paramilitary violence did not affect the hardcore insurgent infrastructure. Such violence, which escalated during this period, was haphazard and often aimed at revenge. 3.5(c)

The continuing economic chaos and terrorist violence led the military to assume power in a March 1976 coup. The new government effectively coordinated the counterinsurgency effort through the National Intelligence Center (NIC) and replaced key police officials with military officers. The NIC collected information from the various intelligence agencies, processed it, and disseminated it to appropriate units for exploitation. Paramilitary organizations were placed under the direct control of their parent organizations and given specific missions against the insurgent support networks. While numerous innocent people were tortured and killed by paramilitary units, most of the victims were at least supporters of the ERP or the Montoneros. Intelligence units successfully penetrated both groups and extracted much information from captured insurgents through the extensive use of torture. Many of the detained insurgents were later killed to prevent their future release by a civilian government. Press censorship was adopted to prevent the insurgents from obtaining media coverage. 3.5(c)

Argentina also obtained the cooperation of neighboring countries when a joint intelligence committee was established to serve as a focus for the exchange of information on insurgent activities in these countries. This cooperative arrangement prevented insurgents from obtaining refuge and assistance from sympathetic groups in countries bordering Argentina. 3.5(c)

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Influence of External Factors

External aid had little influence on the development and maintenance of the Montoneros and the ERP. Both groups acquired large sums of money through kidnapings and bank robberies and used these funds to purchase arms and equipment. Additional weapons were obtained through raids on government installations or by manufacture in sophisticated underground factories. 3.5(c)

3.3(b)(1) Numerous members of the Montoneros and the ERP, however, did receive political organization and military training in Cuba. Furthermore, Cuban officials provided operational guidance in propaganda operations and international logistic support to both groups. 3.3(b)(1) Cuba provided the ERP with funds. Some observers argue that without Cuban training and logistic support neither group could have become so potent. 3.5(c)

The Argentine military received limited military assistance from the United States until 1977, when the Carter administration curtailed all military aid to Argentina because of human rights violations. This assistance had little bearing on the outcome of the insurgency. Argentina manufactured numerous weapons domestically and purchased others from a variety of suppliers. 3.5(c)

Explaining Government Success

Several factors contributed to the government's counterinsurgent success:

- The military government organized an efficient intelligence apparatus that was able to acquire and exploit information on the insurgent infrastructure. A variety of means were employed including penetration, torture, bribes, and limited amnesty.

- Paramilitary terror was effective in decimating the insurgent support network and intimidating the population to dissociate themselves from the insurgents. This type of terror was effective in Argentina because a large portion of the population, while having grievances, had a standard of living high enough to prevent them from risking their lives and well-being for the dubious goals of the insurgents.

- As the violence of the confrontation between the insurgents and the government increased, mass organizations, such as labor, cut their ties to the insurgency. Furthermore, insurgent violence began to lose its political impact as the insurgents concentrated on military targets. The insurgency eventually took on the ethos of a vendetta against the Army rather than of a "people's" war against the government.

- Insurgent large-scale attacks began to threaten civilians not involved in the conflict. As a result the population became disillusioned with the violence in general and began providing information on the insurgents in the hope that peace could be established.

- In those rural areas infested by insurgents, the military combined effective counterinsurgent military operations with civic action programs that won the people over to the military.

- Argentina was able to obtain the cooperation of its neighbors to prevent the insurgents from using neighboring countries as sanctuaries. 3.5(c)

Despite the victory of the Argentine military over the insurgent groups, some observers believe that the brutal methods employed by the military government will seriously impede the Argentine Government from achieving the political consensus necessary to rule effectively. Grievances arising from the brutal suppression of the ERP and Montoneros may contribute to form the basis for future insurgencies. 3.5(c)

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